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COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

EGA Color becomes standard for new PCs

If you're in the market for a personal computer to be used for business purposes — either for the first time or to supplement your existing PCs — here's a new feature that I heartily recommend: EGA Color.

But watch out. As I'll explain in this week's column, this is one time that purchasing the "true blue" version from IBM is not the best or wisest buy.

EGA stands for Enhanced Graphics Adapter. It's a circuit board that plugs into the IBM PC or PC-compatible computers that allows rich, vibrant and easily legible

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color characters to be displayed on a special EGA-compatible monitor. The color is about as clear and sharp as the green and white of the IBM monochrome monitor — a big step above the inferior color that was available in the past.

Almost all new versions of popular programs for the IBM PC and PC-compatible computers are now being made to operate with EGA color. IBM's older, lower-resolution color, the Color Graphics Adapter, is being phased out.

Actually, the EGA is not so new. It was introduced by IBM in 1984. But it has not been until the last six months that about a dozen EGA-compatible boards and EGA-compatible monitors have become available from other manufacturers at reasonable prices.

Sometimes I wonder about the wisdom of IBM. Instead of releasing a product that was reasonably priced, and enjoying the benefits of immediate success, the IBM's EGA board and EGA-compatible color monitor together were priced above $1,700. Not surprisingly, very few were sold.

It took almost two years for other companies to duplicate the functionality of the EGA and come out with lower-cost versions, and this alone set the stage for all the independent software developers to jump on the bandwagon and for retailers to get excited about the product. EGA-compatible boards retail as low as $300, and monitors

as low as $700. The total is about 60 percent of IBM's price.

Now, with prices this low, it simply does not pay to purchase a new personal computer without the new features. The three most common questions I hear, however, are:

✔ Should I upgrade my existing PC for EGA color? My answer: Unless your particular programs demand the use of color — such as programs for presentations or graphics — it probably does not pay to rush into an upgrade. If you do, you'll have to purchase a new monitor in addition to the EGA circuit board, rendering your old monitor superfluous. If your old one works fine, that seems wasteful and unnecessary.

✔ What about lower-cost PC-compatible computers that offer high-resolution color but are not EGA compatible — are they just as good? In some cases, yes. The AT&T 6300 is a good example. But in many cases, the color is not as good and you'll be haunted by compatibility problems later.

✔ If I go with the EGA standard, which of the dozen brand products should I buy? One board that I've tried and liked is the Vega board from Video-7, which uses a "short" slot in the IBM PC and can operate in whatever mode is required by your software. An excellent IBM-compatible monitor that is better than the IBM version is the HX-12E from Princeton Graphic Systems. These two together retail for about $1,200.

However, the most important factor in your choice is the recommendation of the computer dealer on whom you'll be dependent for expert installation and support. Don't even consider purchasing these components from mail order companies — they are much too difficult to set up properly.

The bottom line: If you are buying a new PC, include an EGA-compatible board and monitor. If you already have a PC, it's probably best not to bother with an upgrade unless enhanced color is necessary for your day-to-day work.

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